Amnesty International Global Assembly Meeting – 11-12 September 2021
Secretary General Address
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DELIVERING HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT, LOCALLY AND GLOBALLY

Leading the International Secretariat to enhance Amnesty International's human rights impact, globally and locally, is the core purpose of a Secretary General. Some five months into my post, the scope of that responsibility is clearer, but no less daunting. I want to take this moment to share a little of where my thinking has landed, in terms of the world we face, the state of human rights and their implications for the human rights movement at large, and Amnesty in particular.

A World of Change

We are surrounded by a world in change - threats and challenges that overlap and intertwine - the climate crisis; current and future pandemics; deep inequalities between and within States; a global economy delivering unimaginable wealth to a bare few and low wages or unemployment to millions. A demographic divide with the rich world aging at unprecedented rates, while a staggering 90% of youth are in the Global South, a majority under the impoverishing legacies of colonialism. The latest of the industrial revolutions – centred in information technology - transforms daily life and whole societies - it may even transform what it means to be 'human' - a revolution we can't yet understand, let alone control.

These are historical global forces - driving the inter-connectedness of our world, and demanding collective action at a global level, on a global scale.

The human rights implications are all the graver because we are also in the midst of a reshaping of the international system and international relations. The superpowers, China and the US, vie anew for hegemony, while a third - Russia - seeks to disrupt and destabilize. Trade wars; disputes over sovereignty; proxy conflicts and hot spots; a renewed armaments-race and a new space-race – races to control the unclaimed – from Earth's shrinking, frozen lands, and the bottom of our oceans, to the untold riches of the moon and planets beyond. The signs are all around us.

At a normative level, international rules are defied; attacks mounted against the very idea of universal norms, and on human rights specifically, while an unravelling of the post-World War Two multilateralism is engineered. And all of it is largely, although not exclusively, overlain with toxic narratives that "other" and dehumanize whole communities the world over: the refugee and migrant; Muslims in the Western world; the poor; LGBTI persons, and ethnic and racial minorities.

These multitudinous global shifts are generating human rights violations at a scale and spread likely without precedent; enabled also by well-organized, well-resourced global and local campaigns against human rights defenders, civil society, and our shared demands for universality.

It is an instability force 10 on our human history scale.

COVID: the magnifier of everything that is wrong

The COVID pandemic magnifies it all. It exposes, with brutal clarity, how deep-seated are inequalities. It highlights how post-2008 austerity measures weakened public infrastructure, ravaging public health systems around the globe.

The result? People pushed to the very edge of their capacity to survive. 4.5 million to date who did not - the vast majority elderly, Blacks, members of ethnic minorities, front-line workers, the poor. **A few have benefited to unimaginable levels**.

Oxfam research shows that since the pandemic began, the combined wealth of the world's ten richest men has increased by half a trillion dollars, while the gap between the top 10% and bottom 80% has widened. Some States' fiscal responses to the Covid crisis may have alleviated the worst economic impact, but there too the wealthiest benefited most. What economist Tooze has said of the US is true for the entire world: if governments' response to "Covid was indeed a 'new social contract', it was an alarmingly one-sided affair."

And Covid has revealed the brokenness too of the multilateral system. COVAX, the global vaccine redistribution mechanism, left powerless, emptied out more often than not.

We must ask ourselves WHY?

Why is it so, when globalized management of vaccinations is the ONLY way forward? When that is the only way to prevent new variants emerging?

Why? When we can afford to do it: "6,000 billion dollars have been spent on fiscal support. But only a fraction of that is needed to vaccinate the entire world."

Why, when the Global North could vaccinate 80% of all their people aged over 12 and still have large quantities left to distribute globally?

Why? Is it because those of us benefiting from this gross inequality, do not care enough to say "no, not in my name"? Is it because the West is more concerned with the antivax movement than with vaccine equity? Is it an economic calculation driven by big pharma and their shareholders?

And, dare we ask? Is this but the latest example of global biopolitics? Of state racism as political rationality, driving a biological division of the human species, causing justification for extermination of those deemed not worthy of saving? Is our response to COVID demonstrating forcefully a necropolitics – with entire crowds of people forced to live at the very edge of life, or even on its outer edges?

Ideologies about acceptable violations such as deaths are increasingly part of this century's politics: we see that

- In migration and refugee policies predicated on risk of death as an acceptable deterrent to the point of criminalizing those trying to save lives
- In the post 9/11 securitization framework, bred by the War on Terror
- In the mess of unplanned withdrawal from **Afghanistan**, with those on the front-line of the fight for human rights and democratic values, yesterday's friends and allies, left behind, to fend for themselves facing the Taliban alone?

Those necropolitics are hardwired into our international system - evident in whom it does and does not rescue; in whom it declares a victim and who it ignores; in which deaths are mourned and which are ignored; in whose lives matter and whose just don't.

That's the tough lesson of Covid vaccine nationalism, of the many walls - physical, legal, economic, maritime - erected to prevent refugees and migrants from reaching richer lands, of the massive numbers killed, before our very eyes, by economic austerity and neoliberalism.
This is our world. A crumbling international infrastructure; brutal nationalisms; inequalities in death and in life, and human rights betrayed on so many fronts.

In this world where does recovery begin? **Isn't it a time instead for reset, for reboot?**

That's the question I am grappling with "**Can we re-envisage, re-create, re-establish a new world order, a new international system, with human rights protection at its center – WITHOUT waiting for a World**

War Three or even more Holocausts? Are we willing to be a 1948-like generation - the generation of the UDHR and the UN Charter - or are we a generation of the 1930's, turning a blind eye to the oppression of others so long as our own comfort is sustained? **What would a 1948 UDHR-like response to today's global calamities be? What would a human rights movement and within it a uniquely, truly global human rights organization, do?**

Bootcamp for a Fit Amnesty?

Friends,

Amnesty has so much to build on. Our 60-year history is of many victories, much learning, steady growth, consistent determination. But a brilliant past is not enough to secure an impactful future.

In my mind, this Global Assembly, which will debate and adopt a new, ambitious Strategic Framework, is our opportunity to bridge into an era where Amnesty can help construct the world that we owe to our children and our children's children. **We can bridge into a renewed resistance to the onslaught against human rights, into a renewed offensive that helps establish leadership, institutions and systems fit for protection of our planet and its people against all that plagues us.**

I believe it means Amnesty must:

- **ADAPT**: Rethink how we tackle human rights change; build up a human rights practice fit for the world that we are becoming, not merely the world we were. It must be the world of 2048 that pulls us on, for and in partnership **WITH** young people - those who will live that future.

We must,

- **DEMAND**: a post pandemic world grounded in equality, human rights, and humanity. We can drive that as we did, for instance, the abolition of the death penalty. We can set the agenda that radically reboots the relationship between rights-holders and the planet; that puts rights-holders in control of technology, and fearlessly tackles inequalities – including those of racism and sexism – right down to their very roots.

We must,

- **REACH OUT**: throw open our doors to cast Amnesty's nets of engagement further and wider, forging new partnerships and fresh alliances possibly beyond Amnesty's usual friends, outside our comfort zones. We must be ready to be changed ourselves, including by those for whose future we are fighting – children and young people.

And we must,

- **BE rights to DO rights better**: Human rights must be our identity, not only our demand. Amnesty must live the values we advocate more authentically and more visibly, being resolutely anti-racist and anti-sexist. Racism and sexism are threats to our human rights mandate; to our staff and members and to our credibility. There are no quick or easy fixes. But we can and must create and sustain respectful, appreciative, and empowering working environments across our movement, in which everyone is able to thrive.

More concretely, what does this mean?

Let me highlight a few implications here:

We need a bold, ambitious, future-minded human rights agenda for human rights impact at country, regional and global levels, across an integrated range of themes.

The strategic framework sets the themes for that agenda: civic space, climate, economic, social and cultural rights, women's rights, inequality, artificial intelligence, the obligations of corporate and other non-State actors. All will be the objects of strategy and operational plans over the months to come. And for my part, I will give direct support to those whose human rights dimensions most need further detailing, including:

- Climate justice – Building on Amnesty's impressive human rights analysis and demands for new taxes on fossil fuel company profits, I want us also to work closely with, "adopt", climate affected communities, those on the front-line of the climate crisis; be their partners to monitor human rights impacts and identify rights-based answers with them.
- Racial justice – Noting how the world's necropolitics are deeply racialized, I will work with colleagues to develop and implement an Amnesty global strategy for racial justice.
- Global financial flows and taxation: I want to help build our capacity to demand that States tackle corruption, tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance – all of which undermine deeply human rights protection.
- The future of multilateralism and global leadership for human rights protection: Amnesty has been a leader in this area, partly responsible for creation of the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights. It played a key role in the drafting and adoption of the Convention Against Torture, the Declaration for Human Rights Defenders, and the Arms Trade Treaty. We can play that role again - the new world order requires new world institutions, and we must be part of imagining those, and of helping build them.

To give momentum to this work, I intend to establish an **Innovation and Future Lab**. Let's call it in honor of the UDHR, a **20-48 Commission.** Its purpose is to help Amnesty be nimble, adaptive and relevant - promoting an ethos of horizon scanning, anticipation, and innovation.

To deliver human rights impact in a world of change we also need to:

- Strengthen and invest in human rights research, offering not only superb diagnosis through innovative investigatory methods, but sophisticated policy recommendations cascading into impactful actions.
- Develop cutting-edge legal and public policy analyses: the international legal system must be reshaped to engage trans-boundary information flows, protection of the environment, and uphold duties of corporate and other non-State actors.
- Partnership is key for scale and reach, as I have mentioned. And, we must also consolidate our audiences into participants: mobilizing passive members into activists and donors. Impact on the ground, impact on human rights violations, impact for those for whom we campaign, impact on the systemic nature of violations: they must be our slogans.
- It means adopting innovative approaches to activism and global campaigning, possibly anchored in three principal forms of action: that of resistance, disruption and going on the offensive.
- The global context further demands a more **adaptive, flexible** and **pragmatic operating model**, tailored to succeed in the unpredictable years ahead. Government restrictions on civic space already impact directly on our own operations, in multiple locations. The signs of what lies ahead are far from promising. We cannot be silenced by that intimidation, but we will need more targeted responses, techniques, and capacities for acting, when national sections come under duress.

  The defense of Amnesty civic space is a priority for me that is already underway. With you, we will work to establish robust preparedness for the various scenarios we confront as sections, members and staff, threats from Governments and from targeted campaigns against Amnesty. We will explore, innovate and mature new forms of action-oriented affiliations to enable Amnesty activism wherever we can, while minimizing exposure to risk.
- Financially, we must be secure. Our financial sustainability must be based also on greater predictability. We can and should support growth, explore and strengthen new markets, increase institutional and legacy fundraising.

Dear friends,
The world I have described demands of us a strengthened and amplified global voice, with fuller use made of the formidable Amnesty platforms. Few, if any, violations we face can be handled only locally. They all demand that global connections also be made. Most require global responses and actions.

Over the last five months, many of you have spoken to me about the importance of local relevance – and I fully agree. But to deliver impact, local relevance must be complemented by, part of and enacted alongside global solidarity.

Amnesty is in a unique position to do so. It is after all the only global human rights movement, in contrast to the many international networks of local or thematic actors. Practically this means that Amnesty speaking and acting together, demonstrating global solidarity, are - or should be - in our very DNA.

For that, we must also cut through the noise. Amnesty makes a lot of human rights noise. That's good but it does not automatically convert into human rights impact. Or even human rights influence. We must make of our noise, a **moving, inspiring, and compelling human rights symphony**. We must speak loudly and harmoniously, so that Amnesty's voice resonates globally, within and across our many local contexts with greater human rights impact.

Dear all,

For all the reasons that the world gives us, in keeping with the priorities that you will set for us, and in the spirit of these commitments I am making as Secretary General, I am also calling on you to start this work now - by coming together in a concerted, visible, global effort to stand up against vaccine nationalism.

The world needs Amnesty to demand loudly and universally that the powerful countries redistribute the 700 million strong vaccine surpluses that they do not need. Amnesty can, in one firm unrelenting voice, in all our languages, from all our places, demand that the G20 members multiply the production of vaccines and immediately waive intellectual property rights.

The pandemic cannot be addressed locally alone. Some political leaders may pretend it is otherwise, but let Amnesty be THE global voice calling their lethal bluff.

I am appealing to you as the Movement's leaders, to assert Amnesty's global authority, to manifest our people power by prioritising the vaccines campaign, by supporting the 100-day countdown action that we are about to launch.

Dear friends,

If we fail to stand up against vaccine nationalism, we are made complicit in a massive violation of people's rights; complicit in preventable deaths, we are made agents of a cruel necropolitics. Rarely are we in a position to prevent mass violations. Rarely is there such a deliverable solution to demand. But on this occasion, for this purpose, we can have an extraordinary human rights impact, but only if we act together as One Amnesty.

MANY THANKS.